

Abstract

We study the willingness to compete in a cognitive task among an entire cohort of fresh man business and economics students. Combining data from a lab-in-the-field experiment with university admissions data, we trace the gender gap in competitiveness at different levels of high school performance. Our results confirm that, on average, men choose to compete more often. The gender gap disappears, however, among students with above average high school performance. Female high school top performers are equally competitive as their male counterparts. In fact, the overall gender gap is entirely driven by the group of female high school underperformers who shied away from competition, even when they performed well in our task. Overall, our findings suggest that high school grades are more than just a signal of cognitive abilities, because they seem to influence the receivers self-perception of his or her performance in a competitive environment involved in later on in life.